# Australian Bureau of Statistics

## 1381.0 - Research Paper: A Review of Regional Development Australia Committee Regional Plans, 2013

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# Summary

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# 1.Introduction

# 1.1 Introduction

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of a review of selected aspects of the 2010 and 2011 regional plans of the 55 Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees. The Indian Ocean territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling Island are also included in the summary, because although they are not part of an RDA, they are aligned with RDA Midwest Gascoyne to achieve regional development outcomes and also prepared a regional plan.

According to its National Charter (RDA, 2012), RDA is a partnership between the Australian, state, territory and local governments to strengthen regional communities. RDA consists of a national network of 55 committees, which work with all levels of government, business and community groups to support the growth and development of all regions in Australia. RDA is administered by the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport.

RDA regions are typically made up of several local government areas and vary in size and population. There are 14 RDA regions in NSW, 12 in Queensland, eight in SA, nine in WA, nine in Victoria and the remaining three are the state of Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT. As part of their contractual arrangements with the Australian Government, Regional Development Australia committees are required to prepare and submit regional plans and update them annually. These plans set out the economic, environmental and social vision for the region, articulate the drivers of change, identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities and list priorities for action. They also describe the region, its attributes, industry and employment base. That is, they provide a social, economic and environmental profile of the region.

In 2012, staff from the ABS reviewed the 55 regional plans prepared by the RDA committees. The purposes of this review were to understand the key issues facing RDA committees in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia and how those issues could be supported by data and analysis. This research paper summarises those issues, grouped in the following categories: economy, population, environment, society and infrastructure. A number of RDA committees also identified data gaps and deficiencies. These are discussed in Chapter 7.

It is important to note that this research paper does not summarise the opportunities and aspirations that were also found in the RDA regional plans. Also, the issues identified in this review:

- cannot be attributed to particular groups of stakeholders, as plans did not generally state whether the issues were raised by the RDA committee, members of the community, government stakeholders or in previous reports about the region;
- cannot be added up, ranked or compared across regions, as they differ in importance and severity both within and between regions.

Table 1 summarises the number of RDA regional plans in which each issue was identified.

### Table 1. SUMMARY OF ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN RDA REGIONAL PLANS, By State and Territory

| Issue | NSW | Vic | Qld | SA | WA[1] | Tas, NT & ACT | Total[1] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Number of RDA plans which mention issue | | | | |
| **ECONOMY** | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Economic Threats (Total)** | **14** | **9** | **12** | **8** | **10** | **3** | **56** |
| Reliance on few main industries | 11 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 39 |
| Global Financial Crisis | 3 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 17 |
| High Australian dollar | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 15 |
| Carbon tax | 4 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 11 |
| Environmental legislation | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| **Skills Shortages** | **10** | **9** | **11** | **3** | **8** | **3** | **44** |
| **Tourism** | **5** | **4** | **6** | **8** | **7** | **2** | **32** |
| **POPULATION** | | | | | | | |
| **Growth (Total)** | **9** | **9** | **12** | **5** | **8** | **2** | **45** |
| Strain on services | 6 | 9 | 12 | 5 | 7 | 2 | 41 |
| Impact of urban expansion | 3 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 22 |
| Uneven distribution | 0 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 13 |
| **Ageing** | **14** | **7** | **6** | **8** | **6** | **3** | **44** |
| **Youth Retention** | **8** | **7** | **5** | **8** | **7** | **2** | **37** |
| **Decline** | **6** | **3** | **1** | **5** | **4** | **0** | **19** |
| **ENVIRONMENT** | | | | | | | |
| **Climate Change (Total)** | **7** | **9** | **10** | **6** | **8** | **3** | **43** |
| Possible negative impacts | 5 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 38 |
| Need to reduce contribution | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 12 |
| Lack of planning | 2 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 11 |
| **Water Supply** | **9** | **6** | **9** | **6** | **8** | **3** | **41** |
| **Conservation** | **6** | **8** | **8** | **5** | **9** | **2** | **38** |
| **SOCIETY** | | | | | | | |
| **Education (Total)** | **11** | **9** | **11** | **6** | **9** | **3** | **49** |
| Participation and outcomes | 9 | 7 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 40 |
| Services and facilities | 10 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 8 | 3 | 38 |
| **Health (Total)** | **13** | **8** | **9** | **7** | **8** | **3** | **48** |
| Shortages | 12 | 5 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 3 | 42 |
| Access | 7 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 27 |
| Outcomes | 4 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 19 |
| **Employment (Total)** | **13** | **8** | **11** | **3** | **9** | **3** | **47** |
| Un/Under-employment | 8 | 5 | 11 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 35 |
| Lack of opportunities | 8 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 28 |
| **Socio-economic Disadvantage** | **11** | **9** | **11** | **6** | **6** | **2** | **45** |
| **Housing** | **7** | **8** | **10** | **7** | **10** | **3** | **45** |
| **Youth Support** | **7** | **6** | **4** | **7** | **6** | **0** | **30** |
| **Regional Governance** | **4** | **1** | **6** | **2** | **5** | **3** | **21** |
| **INFRASTRUCTURE** | | | | | | | |
| **Transport Infrastructure (Total)** | **13** | **9** | **11** | **8** | **10** | **3** | **54** |
| Public transport | 13 | 9 | 9 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 48 |
| Road | 10 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 45 |
| Rail | 11 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 37 |
| **Funding/Logistical Issues** | **10** | **7** | **11** | **7** | **9** | **3** | **47** |
| **Communication Infrastructure** | **11** | **8** | **9** | **8** | **6** | **3** | **45** |
| **Community Infrastructure** | **6** | **6** | **8** | **7** | **7** | **1** | **35** |
| **Energy Infrastructure (Total)** | **5** | **5** | **3** | **8** | **5** | **2** | **28** |
| Electricity | 2 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 17 |
| Natural gas | 2 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 14 |
| Renewable | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 10 |
| **Water Infrastructure** | **4** | **4** | **5** | **4** | **3** | **1** | **21** |
| **Waste Infrastructure** | **3** | **1** | **3** | **1** | **4** | **3** | **15** |
| **DATA** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **3** | **5** | **1** | **24** |
| **TOTAL RDAs** | **14** | **9** | **12** | **8** | **10** | **3** | **56** |

[1]Figures for WA include the Indian Ocean Territories, which submitted a plan but are not an RDA committee.

# 2.Economy

## 2.    ECONOMY
### 2.1   Economic Threats

# 2.1 Economic Threats

## 2.1 ECONOMIC THREATS



All regions identified at least one threat to their economy. The most commonly raised economic threat – identified by 39 regions – was the reliance on one or few main industries and the need to diversify the region's economy. Many regions reported that their key industries were seasonally dependent and vulnerable to influences, such as climate and commodity cycles. Other economic threats included fragmented industries, the availability of land for industrial and commercial activity, the cost of freight transport, a lack of value adding to raw commodities and a lack of business expertise.

Other common economic threats reported by RDA committees included the Global Financial Crisis, high Australian dollar, potential impact of the carbon tax and other environmental legislation.

### 2.1.1 Global Financial Crisis (GFC)

Seventeen RDA committees were concerned about the significant negative impacts of the GFC, from which many industries were still recovering. RDA committees reported that lower consumer and business confidence was reducing business investment, employment growth and small business performance. Mining, retail and tourism were the most commonly reported industries affected by the GFC. The GFC was a concern for RDA committees in urban, rural and remote areas. For example, Sydney RDA noted the effect on the financial services sector, consumer confidence and on people's investments and superannuation (Sydney RDA, 2011, p. 94), while in the Kimberley there was concern about its effect on the pearling industry (RDA Kimberley, 2011, p. 26).

### 2.1.2 High Australian Dollar

A negative impact associated with the high Australian dollar was identified by fifteen RDA committees. Many of these committees reported the detrimental effect of the high Australian dollar on manufacturing and agriculture due to the decreased competitiveness of the region's exports. Other common impacts included a decrease in tourism due to the affordability of overseas holidays, a drop in international student numbers and a trend towards online purchases and purchases of imported goods. For example, these concerns were echoed in Melbourne East and in Tasmania, where tourism, international education, agriculture and manufacturing are important industries (Melbourne East RDA, 2011, p. 44, RDA Tasmania, 2011, p. 30).

### 2.1.3 Carbon Tax

Eleven RDA committees discussed the potentially negative effects that the introduction of a carbon tax may have. Many of these regions were concerned about the potential impact of increased farm operating costs on the agricultural industry and increased energy costs on the manufacturing and mining industries (for example, RDA Illawarra, 2011, p. 10). There was also concern that an increase in the price of airfares may affect tourism and air services in remote areas. Uncertainty surrounding a carbon trading scheme was identified as a concern due to its effect on investment in new energy production.

### 2.1.4 Environmental Legislation

Seven RDA committees identified environmental legislation as a potential threat to some industries. Some RDA committees reported that environmental approvals added complexity and uncertainty to investment and business operations, and slowed plans for the resources sector. Some RDA committees were concerned that legislation to protect coastal areas would have a negative impact on commercial fishing and tourism. The Loddon Mallee RDA committee in Victoria reported that its agricultural industry was vulnerable to changes in water policy which reduced allocation for irrigation (Loddon Mallee RDA, 2010, p.9) and the Limestone Coast RDA committee in South Australia reported that the recent Natural Resource Management Bill (2010) may create uncertainty in relation to investment in the forestry industry (RDA Limestone Coast, 2011, p. 2).

## 2.2 Shortage of Skilled Workers

A frequently raised economic issue – identified by 44 regions – was a current or potential shortage of skilled workers. RDA committees reported difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled professionals in rural and remote communities, particularly health professionals and teachers. While many regions did not specify which industries were experiencing skills shortages, the most common professions identified included tradespeople, engineers, nurses and teachers. Perth RDA noted "an unprecedented shortage of skills and labour," due to the mining boom and identified key shortages in architects, engineers, surveyors, medical professionals, social workers and trade workers such as mechanics, welders and electrical technicians (Perth RDA, 2011, p. 31). Despite having a very different economic base to that of Perth, RDA Tasmania reported that skills shortages in similar professions, including engineering, automotive, electrical, building and construction, health, education, hospitality, food and services and manufacturing industries (RDA Tasmania, 2011, p. 32).

## 2.3 Tourism

The need to improve their tourism industry was raised by 32 RDA committees. These committees cited a lack of tourism infrastructure, accommodation options and an integrated tourism strategy as factors that prevented the development of the industry. Other common concerns included a negative outside perception of the region and a lack of awareness and marketing of the region's assets. A negative perception of the region was also linked to other key economic and population issues, with many regional plans noting its potential to deter new residents, skilled workers and business investment. This was summarised by Moreton Bay RDA, which noted that "the lack of a regional identity – a sense of place – is impacting on the ability of the region to attract new investment, new jobs, residents, businesses and tourists" (RDA Moreton Bay, 2011, p. 83).

# 3.Population

**3.    POPULATION**
      3.1   Population Growth
      3.2   Population Ageing
      3.3   Youth Retention
      3.4   Population Decline

# 3.1 Population Growth

**3.1 POPULATION GROWTH**

The most commonly raised population issue – reported by 45 regions – was a current or predicted

rapid growth in population. Forty-one RDA committees reported concern about the strain a rapidly increasing population would place on infrastructure and service provision, including housing, transport, health, education and water. The potential impact of urban expansion on the natural environment, amenity and the availability of agricultural land was also frequently raised.

Uneven distribution of population growth, both geographically and seasonally, was an issue raised by thirteen RDA committees. Some committees reported that expected growth in regional centres coupled with decline in smaller communities would lead to a withdrawal of services and an increase in disadvantage in those small towns. Some committees also reported that seasonal variations in population, mainly due to fly-in, fly-out workers or a high number of tourists in summer, put further pressure on local facilities and services (for example, RDA Midwest Gascoyne, 2011, p. 46).

## 3.2 Population Ageing

### 3.2 POPULATION AGEING



Forty-four RDA committees reported that their population was ageing. Various economic and welfare challenges were associated with an ageing population. The potential impacts included an increased demand for aged care services, health care, transport and community infrastructure, as well as a shrinking labour force which may exacerbate labour shortages. Many RDA committees, such as the Whyalla and Eyre Peninsula RDA, reported that the ageing population would increase demand for "a variety of specialist housing types including retirement housing and independent and supported aged-care facilities" (RDA Whyalla and Eyre Peninsula, 2011, pp. 165-166).

## 3.3 Youth Retention

### 3.3 YOUTH RETENTION

The retention of young people was reported as being an issue in many regions. Thirty-seven RDA committees reported experiencing an out-migration of youth aged 15 to 30 years who leave the region to pursue education, training and employment opportunities and because of a lack of recreational facilities (see also section 4.6 'Youth Support'). Addressing the reasons why young people may leave a region was a high priority for many RDA committees, such as the Wheatbelt RDA in Western Australia (RDA Wheatbelt Inc., 2011, p. 23).

# 3.4 Population Decline

### 3.4 POPULATION DECLINE



The issue of population decline and sustainability in rural and remote areas was raised by nineteen RDA committees. For example, this is reported as being one of the key challenges in the RDA Far West (NSW), where Broken Hill's population has been declining since the 1960s (RDA Far West NSW, 2011, p. 18). Where population decline was occurring, RDA committees reported that better strategies were needed to attract and retain residents and businesses to prevent the withdrawal of services and to ensure that these areas remained viable and economically productive.
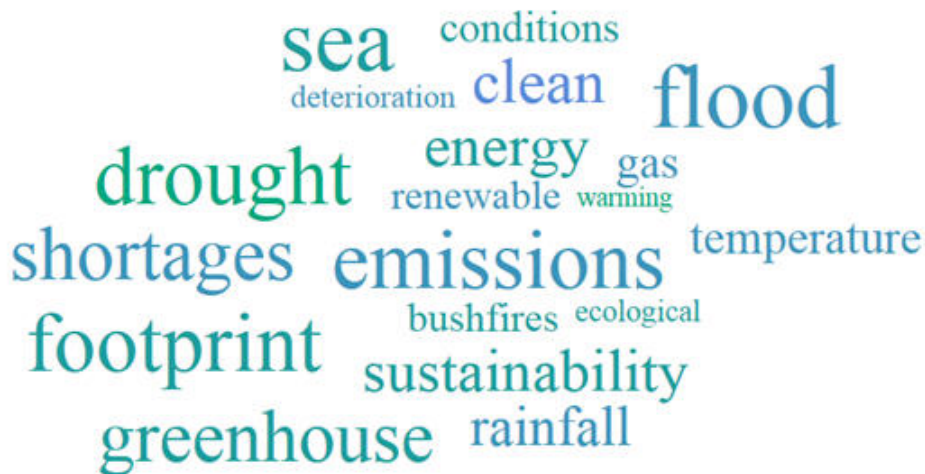
# 4.Environment

### 4.   ENVIRONMENT
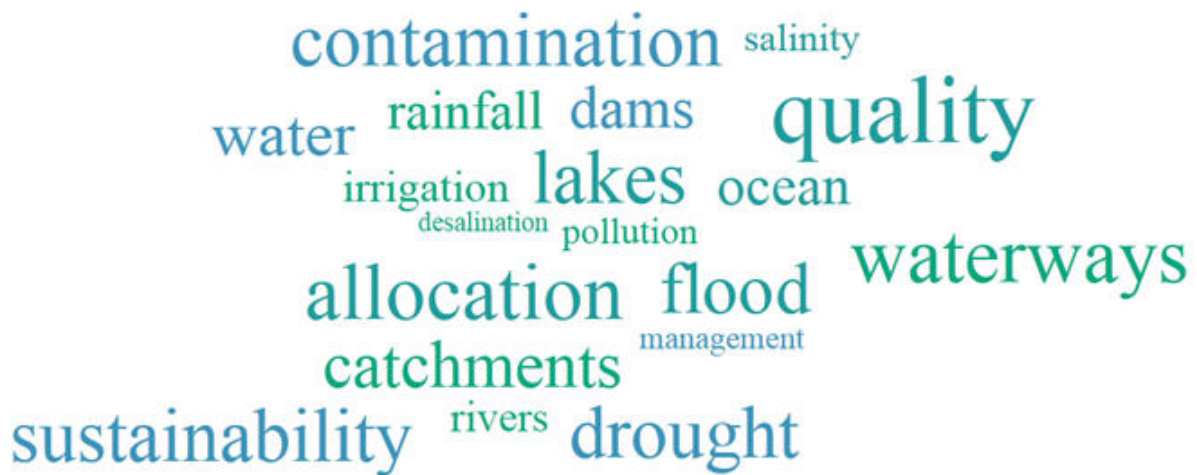
# 4.1 Climate Change

### 4.1 CLIMATE CHANGE



Climate change was reported as being an issue by 43 RDA committees. Thirty-eight committees identified the potential impacts of climate change, such as more frequent severe weather events, increased bushfire risk, flooding of coastal areas, deterioration of the natural environment, water shortages and heat-related health problems. In many regions, there was concern that an increase in temperature and decrease in rainfall would have a negative effect on agriculture and primary production. In Victoria's Hume region, there was concern that climate change could result in decreased snowfalls, which would affect the snow-based recreation and tourism industries (RDA Hume, 2010, p. 18).

Twelve RDA committees reported a need to reduce their contribution to climate change by decreasing their carbon emissions or ecological footprint. Strategies identified to achieve this included increasing renewable energy use, promoting sustainable urban design, investing in public transport and increasing the community's understanding of potential impacts.

Eleven RDA committees identified a lack of direction in planning for climate change or the need for an integrated climate change strategy as significant issues. Four committees reported that a lack of awareness and acceptance about the threat of climate change was impeding the planning and preparation needed to manage its potential impacts.

# 4.2 Water Supply

### 4.2 WATER SUPPLY

contamination salinity
water rainfall dams quality
irrigation lakes ocean
desalination pollution
allocation flood waterways
management
catchments
sustainability rivers drought

Water security was noted as a concern for RDA committees in 41 regions, often due to recent drought or limited water supply options. The need for more efficient irrigation and water management was frequently raised, as was the difficulty of balancing the demand for water for industrial, residential and amenity purposes with sustaining water security. For example, the RDA Barossa identified through its consultation process that "water stewardship and infrastructure for multiple water reuse" was a key sustainability issue for members of its communities (RDA Barossa, 2012, p. 26). Various water quality issues were also identified by RDA committees, such as salinity, contamination, pollution and the poor health of waterways.

## 4.3 Conservation

### 4.3 CONSERVATION

resources management
protection endangered
extinct eroded heritage
sustainable balance
natural nature erradicated
bio-links
parks biodiversity
habitats preservation
environmental
vegetation

Preserving and improving the natural environment, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources were significant issues for 38 RDA committees. A common challenge was the need to protect the natural environment from potential damage caused by urban growth. The difficulty of balancing the provision of housing for a growing population with the preservation of biodiversity, native vegetation and wildlife was commonly reported. Several regions also described the conflict between protecting the natural environment and extracting maximum economic revenues from recreation, tourism and industry.

The environmental impact of inappropriate land use was reported as being an issue in some regions. Many inappropriate land uses were identified, such as unsustainable farming and grazing, land clearing and residential and industrial development. The reported impacts of these activities included

the degradation of natural resources, vegetation and biodiversity and salinity issues. Some committees noted that the lack of a land use management plan or legislation to prevent inappropriate development was a significant threat to the natural environment and resources. A lack of a broader regional sustainability plan, as well as limited resources for the protection of environmental assets, were also reported by several committees.

Other conservation issues raised by the RDA committees included the need to manage limited resources such as water and energy in a sustainable way, establish sustainable agricultural practices to ensure food security, develop new techniques to enhance biodiversity, protect endangered species, improve landscape connectivity - or 'bio-links' - between natural habitats and reduce the threat of feral animals and introduced weeds (see, for example, RDA Adelaide Metropolitan Inc., 2012, p. 33).

# 4.4 Other Issues

**4.4 OTHER ISSUES**

Other environmental issues raised by RDA committees included a high bushfire risk across many areas (reported by seven committees), air pollution (reported by three committees), limited capacity to recover from natural disasters (reported by the Wide Bay Burnett RDA (2011, p. 20) and Townsville and North West Queensland RDA committees (2011, p. 47)) and flood prone areas (reported by the Gold Coast RDA committee (2011, p. 13) and the Brisbane RDA committee (2011, p. 9)).

# 5.Society

5. **SOCIETY**
   5.1 Education
   5.2 Health
   5.3 Employment
   5.4 Socio-economic Disadvantage
   5.5 Housing
   5.6 Youth Support
   5.7 Regional Governance

# 5.1 Education

**5.1 EDUCATION**

Forty-nine RDA committees identified education as an issue. More specifically, education issues fell into the categories of participation and educational outcomes and the standard of educational services and facilities.

### 5.1.1 Participation and Outcomes

Forty RDA committees reported low levels of educational participation and attainment compared to state averages. Common concerns included low school retention rates, completion of Year 12, participation in post-school education, apprenticeship commencements and attainment of post-school qualifications. High levels of truancy and low levels of literacy and numeracy in some Indigenous communities were raised as an issue in some regions. Another frequently reported issue was a geographic disparity within regions in Year 12 completion and tertiary participation rates. In one example, Logan RDA reported a correlation between low rates of completion of secondary school and high levels of unemployment in some areas (RDA Logan and Redlands, 2011, p. 12).

### 5.1.2 Services and Facilities

Limited educational opportunities and facilities were raised by 38 RDA committees. A lack of post-school education and training opportunities was frequently reported, particularly in rural communities. Some RDA committees reported that school closures in remote communities and the centralisation of tertiary and vocational education services to regional centres forced students to travel long distances for education. This, coupled with poor public transport and a shortage of student accommodation, was commonly identified as a significant barrier to participation in further education.

The need for a broader range of tertiary and vocational courses and for clearer pathways and linkages between schools, tertiary studies and employment was commonly discussed. Several RDA committees stated the need for greater collaboration between industry and training providers so that training reflected regional employment opportunities. Other educational issues included attracting and retaining teaching staff, ageing school facilities, a lack of information and communications technology training and cultural education, a lack of support for students who are unable to attend school for social or economic reasons and heightened pressure on schools due to an increased compulsory leaving age in some states.

# 5.2 Health

### 5.2 HEALTH



A significant number of RDA committees (48) reported at least one issue relating to health. These issues fell into three main categories: health care shortages, inadequate access to health care services and health outcomes.

### 5.2.1 Health Care Shortages

The most common health issue – reported by 42 RDA committees – was a shortage of health care services or health professionals, particularly in rural and remote areas. Frequently reported shortages of health professionals included general practitioners, nurses, pathologists, dentists, optometrists and other specialists such as speech pathologists, physiotherapists and podiatrists. For many regions, the difficulty of attracting and retaining medical staff in rural and remote communities was the most significant barrier to providing quality health care in these areas.

Commonly reported shortages of health care services included aged care, mental health services, maternity services, culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, domestic violence services, drug and alcohol services, emergency services and cancer care. The withdrawal of these services from small communities was a concern in several regions, as were the closure of regional hospitals and the need for access to preventative health information. Excessive demand on the public health system, evident in long waiting lists and high hospital bed occupancy rates, was a significant issue in some regions. Many RDA committees also noted that the growing and ageing population would increase the demand on health services.

### 5.2.2 Access to Health Care Services

Another common health issue – reported by RDA committees in 27 regions – was the isolation of rural communities from access to health care services. For example, the Hume RDA reported that access to more complex specialist health services, such as cancer and renal care was a major issue for the region (RDA Hume, 2010, p. 30). Many regions reported that residents of rural and remote communities had to travel long distances to access primary health care. The need to improve access in these communities by increasing services, public transport and assistance schemes was frequently identified.

### 5.2.3 Health Outcomes

Poor health outcomes were reported as being a concern in nineteen regions. High levels of chronic conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity and alcoholism, were commonly reported, as was a high prevalence of behavioural risk factors such as smoking, drinking alcohol, poor diet and lack of exercise. RDA committees in several regions reported a lower-than-average life expectancy and high prevalence of cancer, mental health disorders, arthritis, asthma and osteoporosis. Significantly poorer health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations was often raised as an issue, with particular concerns including low birth weight, poor diet, a high rate of hospitalisation, diabetes, dental, renal and coronary heart disease and drug and alcohol abuse. For example, the Northern Territory RDA identified that a range of "lifestyle related health conditions" had a negative impact on Territorians' wellbeing (RDA Northern Territory, 2011, p.9).

# 5.3 Employment

### 5.3 EMPLOYMENT

Most RDA committees (47) identified unemployment levels or a lack of employment opportunities as a key issue for the region.

### 5.3.1 Unemployment and Underemployment

Above average unemployment rates and low labour force participation rates were reported to be concerns in 32 regions, particularly among youth and in Indigenous communities. High levels of underemployment – where many employees worked on a part-time, casual or seasonal basis - were reported in eight regions. Some RDA committees also identified that this issue was masked by relatively low overall unemployment levels. Below average weekly incomes and the geographic concentration of extremely high and intergenerational unemployment were reported by several RDA committees.

### 5.3.2 Lack of Employment Opportunities

A lack of employment opportunities was identified in 28 regions. The need to increase the diversity of employment options was a key issue for many regions. Also, the lack of professional and high-paying jobs was often identified and was considered a barrier to attracting and retaining an educated workforce. Several RDA committees reported that a lack of entry level and graduate positions were contributing to high youth unemployment. The ACT also identified a lack of employment opportunities for those people with a disability who may require assistance to participate in the workforce (2011, p. 59).

Many RDA committees reported the need for more local job opportunities and land for industrial and commercial activity to reduce travel time, road congestion and reliance on major cities for employment. A common problem was the need to generate the number of new jobs required to ensure employment levels kept pace with a growing population or job losses in declining industries. Many RDA committees also discussed the need for community training centres to retrain retrenched workers and those working in declining industries.

### 5.3.3 Other Employment Issues

Several regions reported that there was an inadequate understanding of the capabilities of and cultural barriers to the employment of immigrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (for example: RDA Riverina NSW, 2011, p.21; RDA Central West, 2011, pp. 29-32; RDA Kimberley, 2011, p.40). Other employment issues included a high level of the population reliant on Australian Government pensions and allowances in Tasmania (2011, p. 5) and a large difference between the incomes of people who work in the resources sector and those who do not in the Pilbara region (RDA Pilbara Inc., 2012, p. 31).

# 5.4 Socio-economic Disadvantage

**5.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE**

Socio-economic disadvantage in terms of household income, employment, access to health and education services or social exclusion was identified as an issue for 45 RDA committees. While some committees reported high levels of socio-economic disadvantage across the whole region, most identified that particular local government areas or population groups experienced significant disadvantage. Some regions used the ABS' Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) - which provide a ranking of relative socio-economic disadvantage - to describe the level of disadvantage in particular local government areas.

A problem raised by RDA committees in many regions was the entrenched and intergenerational disadvantage in some areas and among particular groups. It was often commented that people in these areas experienced barriers to education and workforce participation, poorer health outcomes, social exclusion and welfare dependency. Migrant and ethnic communities were commonly identified as disadvantaged groups who were in need of language and settlement services. It was also reported that young people from disadvantaged areas were more likely to experience drug and alcohol problems and homelessness.

Disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was a common issue. Many regions were concerned about the poor health outcomes, limited education and employment opportunities, lack of service access and inadequate supply of housing, water, nutrition and sanitation in these communities. The need to 'close the gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was often reported. RDA committees in many regions were concerned about a widening disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged areas, commonly between more affluent inner suburbs and outer areas of lower socio-economic status.

Several RDA committees discussed the need for better support for disadvantaged communities, recognising the need for place-based solutions and a greater number of homelessness services.

# 5.5 Housing

### 5.5 HOUSING

The majority of RDA committees (45) reported housing shortages or affordability issues. A lack of affordable housing was a common concern. RDA committees reported significant shortages of public housing, rental housing, student and crisis accommodation and accommodation for seasonal workers. Homelessness was reported as being a major issue for several RDA committees, including Sydney, where it was considered a "significant challenge" (RDA Sydney, 2011, p. 3). Overcrowding was also commonly raised, particularly in Indigenous communities.

Another frequently raised issue was the need for new dwellings to accommodate a growing population in areas with limited available land for urban expansion. Meeting the increasing demand for smaller homes appropriate for an ageing population was considered a challenge in some regions.

# 5.6 Youth Support

### 5.6 YOUTH SUPPORT

RDA committees in 30 regions reported a lack of youth services, employment or educational opportunities and this was considered to contribute to the migration of youth from the region. High youth unemployment was commonly attributed to a lack of entry level, school leaver or graduate positions and limited work experience opportunities. Many RDA committees also identified that a lack of skill development, training, job search support and assistance with the transition from school to work also excluded young people from the workforce.

A lack of youth centres, recreation facilities and social activities was also reported. This was commonly associated with high rates of youth involvement in incidents of property damage, assault and road trauma as well as issues of substance abuse, depression and suicide. Other youth issues included a high number of children in out of home care, a high level of child vulnerability in terms of health, cognitive and communication skills, long waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services and a lack of early intervention and family planning services.

# 5.7 Regional Governance

### 5.7 REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

RDA committees in 21 regions raised the issue of regional governance, leadership or community involvement. The need for a coordinated approach to policy, planning and investment across all levels of government was the most common governance issue. A lack of integration of regional plans and strategies and the need for an overarching authority to coordinate the three levels of government were also identified as issues in many regions. For example, a "coordinated approach to the development of sporting and recreation infrastructure and programs" was recognised as important by Great Southern RDA, to align local and state government recreation planning (Great Southern RDA, 2011, pp. 39-40).

A lack of community consultation was also raised. RDA committees in some regions reported limited opportunities for community input into regional planning and a lack of rural representation at both the state and federal level. Several RDA committees identified that this was leading to a feeling of community disconnection, a lack of local leadership and a lack of understanding about the region among state and federal government agencies.

Other governance issues raised included a lack of support for local organisations, a heavy reliance on volunteers to provide essential services and a large number of local leaders nearing retirement age.

# 6.Infrastructure

### 6. INFRASTRUCTURE
    6.1 Transport Infrastructure
    6.2 Funding and Logistical Issues
    6.3 Communications Infrastructure
    6.4 Community Infrastructure
    6.5 Energy Infrastructure
    6.6 Water Infrastructure
    6.7 Waste Infrastructure

# 6.1 Transport Infrastructure

### 6.1 TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

Fifty-four of the 56 RDA committees recognised issues associated with transport infrastructure. These issues can be divided into three categories: public transport, road and rail.

**6.1.1 Public Transport**

Most RDA committees (48) reported issues with their public transport system. In many regions, RDA committees reported a lack of reliable, efficient and affordable public transport options and limited services in many areas. Common issues were a lack of public transport connecting workers to employment nodes and limited fast metropolitan commuter options, particularly for residents in outer suburbs. A lack of public transport in rural areas was a significant concern in some regions. It was reported that poor or non-existent public transport exacerbated the experience of social isolation and inequality in accessing health care and education in rural and remote communities.

Under-utilisation of public transport was an issue raised by RDA committees in several regions. They reported the need to increase the use of public transport to reduce private vehicle use, traffic congestion and greenhouse emissions. Other issues included the need to improve access for the elderly and disabled, increase services in areas of high population growth and enhance planning and investment in public transport.

**6.1.2 Road**

A poor standard of road networks was reported by 45 RDA committees. Several committees reported that major road upgrades were needed to accommodate increased freight, which was causing significant deterioration of roads not suited for heavy vehicles. Freight constraints, including poor road condition, narrow bridges with low weight limits and a lack of heavy vehicle bypass routes, were frequently cited as a barrier to industrial growth. Poor transport connectivity was commonly reported, including the need for better linkages to employment centres and access to ports.

Many RDA committees, especially those in the urban centres of Sydney, Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Northern Melbourne, Melbourne East and Perth, identified issues such as decreased quality of life and productivity associated with traffic congestion, particularly at peak times and along key commuter routes. Other road issues identified by RDA committees included the need for quality arterial roads, the poor condition of unsealed roads and a reliance on one main transport corridor, which caused disruptions during road accidents and maintenance.

**6.1.3 Rail**

RDA committees in 37 regions identified issues relating to train and rail transport. The poor and deteriorating condition of rail lines and a lack of rail connections to many towns were commonly reported. Several regions reported the need to increase the use of rail freight to reduce reliance on roads. Many barriers to freight transportation by rail were also identified and included a lack of gauge standardisation, no connections to the National Interstate Rail Network, restricted speeds and congestion on single line networks. Some RDA committees reported the need for a very fast train connection between major cities and the need to improve the quality, frequency and reliability of

passenger train services. A concern was raised by the Far North RDA in South Australia that increased freight movements could affect traffic flow and community safety due to the number and location of level crossings in Port Augusta (2011, p. 49).

### 6.1.4 Other transport issues

Other transport issues raised by RDA committees concerned the deficiencies of ports or airports. These issues included the need for a major trading port, the need to upgrade ports and congestion problems due to freight. For example, the Northern Territory RDA reported a need to upgrade its port facilities to service future growth in mining and agricultural exports (RDA Northern Territory, 2011, p.14). The need to expand regional airports and passenger services was also commonly expressed. RDA committees in several regions reported that air services in major centres had been reduced or removed and that the limited air services between regional centres was a significant barrier to tourism.

# 6.2 Funding and Logistical Issues

## 6.2 FUNDING AND LOGISTICAL ISSUES

Almost all RDA committees (47) discussed the funding or logistical difficulties of providing appropriate and timely infrastructure and services. RDA committees in many regions reported that it was difficult to develop and maintain infrastructure with a population dispersed across a large land area. Low population density meant a limited revenue base for local councils which affected their ability to fund maintenance or sustain the delivery of services. RDA committees in several regions commented that service provision was not evenly distributed across the region, with infrastructure development often focussed in few regional centres rather than in smaller regional communities. For many regions, these issues led to the closure of many services and an overall poor standard of infrastructure in remote communities.

A lack of infrastructure spending and investment was a frequently identified issue. RDA committees in some regions reported that spending did not match the rate of population growth and was subject to political term funding cycles. Poor infrastructure planning was another common issue. This included the need for a more coordinated approach to infrastructure development, the need to integrate transport and land use planning, a lack of defined timelines for new projects and inconsistent planning approval processes. Other issues that impeded infrastructure development and service delivery included environmental protection legislation, regulatory inconsistency across regional boundaries and limited access to some remote areas during the wet season.

# 6.3 Communications Infrastructure

## 6.3 COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Poor mobile phone or broadband coverage was an issue raised by RDA committees in 45 regions. Common problems included limited access to consistent and high speed broadband services, mobile phone and broadband 'black spots' and a large proportion of the population without an internet connection. RDA committees in many regions reported that poor mobile and broadband coverage prevented business growth and investment and was a significant safety issue in rural areas. The widening gap in broadband services between urban and rural areas was also frequently raised.

Nevertheless, RDA committees in many regions were optimistic that the roll out of the National Broadband Network (NBN) would help to solve these issues. The NBN is a high speed broadband network that will be established across Australia over the next ten years (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2012, www.nbn.gov.au). Many RDA committees discussed the need to secure early access to the NBN and ensure that all regional centres would benefit. RDA committees in some regions were concerned that not all areas would benefit from the NBN, particularly remote communities who need it the most. The RDA ACT reported that the provision of the NBN would

be delayed if an agreement between NBN Co and TransACT (the ACT's broadband provider) could not be reached (2011, p. 56). RDA Tasmania reported that contractual agreements for information and telecommunication services restricted access to the NBN for some educational institutions (2011, p. 26).

The Barwon South-West region of Victoria and the Kimberley region of Western Australia also pointed out that knowledge and education about the availability and use of information and telecommunication services was needed so that people can effectively use communication technologies and benefit from enhanced broadband access (RDA Barwon South West, 2010, p.10; RDA Kimberley, 2011, p. 54).
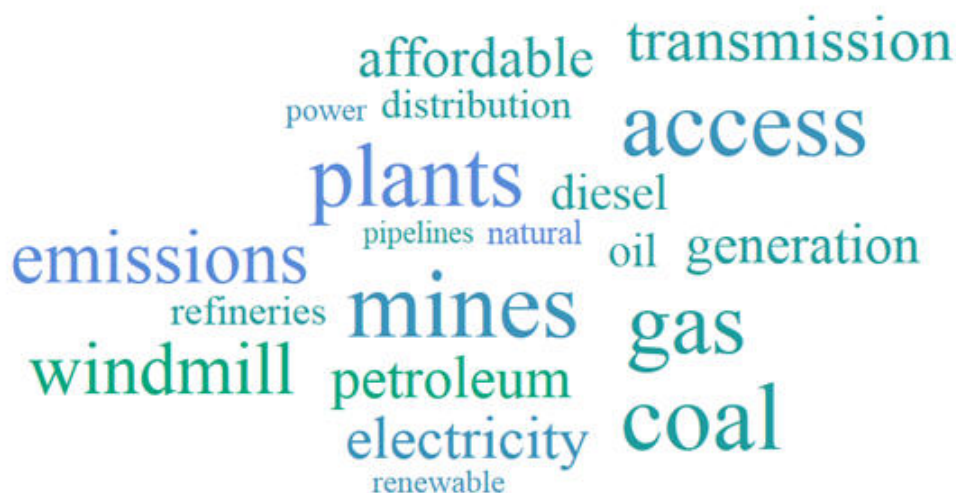
# 6.4 Community Infrastructure

## 6.4 COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

RDA committees in 35 regions reported an issue with social and community infrastructure. Inadequate provision of sport and recreational facilities was frequently identified, with common complaints including aged facilities, a lack of sporting facilities of international standard and professional regional teams, a need for greater coordination of formal and junior sport, as well as limited open space, parks and bicycle and walking paths. Inequitable provision of community infrastructure was often raised as an issue. RDA committees in many regions reported that residents of outer metropolitan, rural and remote areas did not have the same level of access to community, sport and recreational facilities as people who live in regional centres or inner city suburbs.

RDA committees in several regions reported a lack of funding and support for community infrastructure, particularly for cultural and arts events, festivals and venues. Other shortages of social and community infrastructure included town centres, facilities for religious activities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, local television and radio services, child care, security lighting and cameras and funeral services.

# 6.5 Energy Infrastructure

## 6.5 ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE



RDA committees in 28 regions raised an issue regarding energy infrastructure. These issues can be divided into three groups: electricity, natural gas and renewable energy infrastructure.

### 6.5.1 Electricity

Electricity infrastructure was identified as an issue in seventeen regions. The lack of a stable, reliable and affordable source of power was common. RDA committees were concerned with the age, safety and efficiency of their electricity network and commented that it was reaching peak capacity and could not accommodate additional demand. It was frequently reported that many communities were not connected to the national power grid and that power in remote communities needed to be generated locally using expensive diesel generators. In many regions, the inaccessibility and high cost of electricity was seen as a major barrier to industrial growth and development.

### 6.5.2 Natural Gas

RDA committees in fourteen regions identified an issue with natural gas infrastructure. Poor access to natural gas was reported in most of these regions; many areas, such as parts of Victoria's Gippsland, were not supplied with reticulated natural gas and relied on bottled gas, which could be expensive (RDA Gippsland, 2010, p. 108).

### 6.5.3 Renewable Energy

Issues with renewable energy infrastructure were raised by RDA committees in ten regions. These regions commonly reported the need to increase the generation and usage of renewable energy. RDA committees in some regions commented that the majority of their energy came from non-renewable sources and they needed to supplement this with renewable energy generation. In the Goldfields-Esperance region, for example, development of renewable energy sources was one of the four critical aspirations of the region, but there were considerable challenges associated with providing renewable energy to the mining industry, regional towns and remote communities. (RDA Goldfields-Esperance, 2012, pp. 1-2). However, it was also identified that there was a lack of understanding about renewable energy options and a lack of land allocated for these developments.

# 6.6 Water Infrastructure

## 6.6 WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

RDA committees in 21 regions raised an issue about water infrastructure. Most of these RDA committees reported that better management of water resources and improved water infrastructure were needed to conserve water and ensure its future availability. Particular water infrastructure issues included out-dated measurement and delivery systems, the need to improve urban design and irrigation infrastructure and the need to develop innovative water catchment and saving technologies. It was also reported that the quality and quantity of water infrastructure was not adequate to support population growth or mining developments.

# 6.7 Waste Infrastructure

## 6.7 WASTE INFRASTRUCTURE

Deficits in waste infrastructure and management were reported by RDA committees in fifteen regions. The most common issues identified were the diminishing availability of landfill and unsustainable landfill practices, low levels of recycling and high volumes of waste. Other reported issues included an increasing cost of waste disposal, ineffective and inefficient waste management in remote communities, the need to ensure that landfill practices met legislative requirements and a lack of sewerage infrastructure, which restricted urban development and was a major health and environmental concern.

# 7.Data Issues

## 7. DATA ISSUES

# 7.1 Data Issues

### 7.1 DATA ISSUES

Twenty four RDA committees reported shortcomings in the availability or quality of data. Often reports did not identify specific data gaps, but reported a general lack of reliable and consistent regional data. Specific data gaps were, however, identified in relation to economic and industry data, as many regions wanted to be able to identify economic opportunities and align training with industry needs more easily. This required better data regarding the types of businesses in regions, business activity, emerging industries and skills shortages. Other notable gaps included information about regional grants programs, growth patterns, land use changes, the impact of natural disasters and social service provision.

Issues of regional data quality were also reported. For example, some RDAs were concerned that government funding and service provision were based on usual resident population estimates and excluded transient workers and people who travel across state borders to access services (see McKay / Whitsunday RDA, 2011, p. 17 and Loddon Mallee RDA, 2010, p. 39). The Far North region in South Australia reported that data at the postcode level in outback SA does not accurately reflect the region's socio-economic disadvantage (RDA Far North (SA), 2011, p. 54). It was also identified in Perth's roadmap that the boundaries of Perth according to RDA do not fully align with the boundaries of the Perth Statistical Division used by the ABS (Perth RDA, 2012, p. 4). Furthermore, the Indian Ocean Territories raised the issue that the ABS does not publish Estimated Resident Population by age and sex for Christmas Island or publish separate statistics for the two Cocos Island populations (RDA Midwest Gascoyne Indian Ocean Territories Regional Plan (draft for consultation), 2011, pp. 9- 11).

Another frequently raised issue was the desire for an integrated regional data set where a range of regional information could be pooled and accessed by all stakeholders. It was frequently reported that data collection and dissemination were dispersed, duplicated, out-of-date and lacked integration. Many RDA committees suggested that a single comprehensive data set including economic, social and environmental data would be useful for policy, planning and investment decisions.

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# About this Release

This research paper summarises a review of the regional plans of the Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees.

RDA is a partnership between the Australian, state, territory and local governments. It is administered by the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport. Nationally, the RDA network consists of 55 committees, which work with all levels of government, business and community groups to support the growth and development of regions in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia. As part of their agreement with the Australian Government, Regional Development Australia committees are required to prepare regional plans and update them annually. These plans provide a social, economic and environmental profile of the region and also set out its economic, environmental and social vision, identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities and list priorities for action.

The purpose of the ABS' review was to understand how RDA committees were using data. This paper summarises the key economic, demographic, environmental, social, infrastructure and data issues raised by the RDA committees in their plans, because knowing about these key issues is one important way in which the ABS can understand the current and future data and analytical needs of the RDA committees.